

A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

by John Li

The prospect of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land first came about when Dean Matthias Der returned from the Deans' Conference in Jerusalem in May 2014. The opportunity was confirmed in January 2015 and I think I was the first to sign up. I eagerly anticipated the trip. The days leading up to our departure coincided, however, with what many feared would be the third Palestinian intifada (uprising) and there were daily communications with our partners in Jerusalem to consider our safety. Most pilgrims made the decision to go ahead and we found ourselves in very safe and careful hands. Although the political tensions were apparent throughout the trip, most visibly in the form of the security checkpoints and the separation wall, they did not defeat its purpose: a religious experience offering the chance to walk in the places where Jesus walked and to be absorbed into the historical and political context.

During the trip, we also benefited from talks given by speakers coming from different perspectives, including both Palestinian and Jewish Israeli. One speaker stressed that there was a lot of unhappiness on both sides and, as this was not a football match, he urged outsiders to let them deal with the conflict and not take sides and fight their fight from the sideline. I agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment.

Like an open air synagogue, the *Western Wall*, the remnant of the ancient Temple complex in the Old City of Jerusalem, is one of the holiest sites in the Jewish faith. Behind it is the glorious *Dome of the Rock*, the city's most recognisable landmark and one of the oldest works of Islamic architecture.



The Team

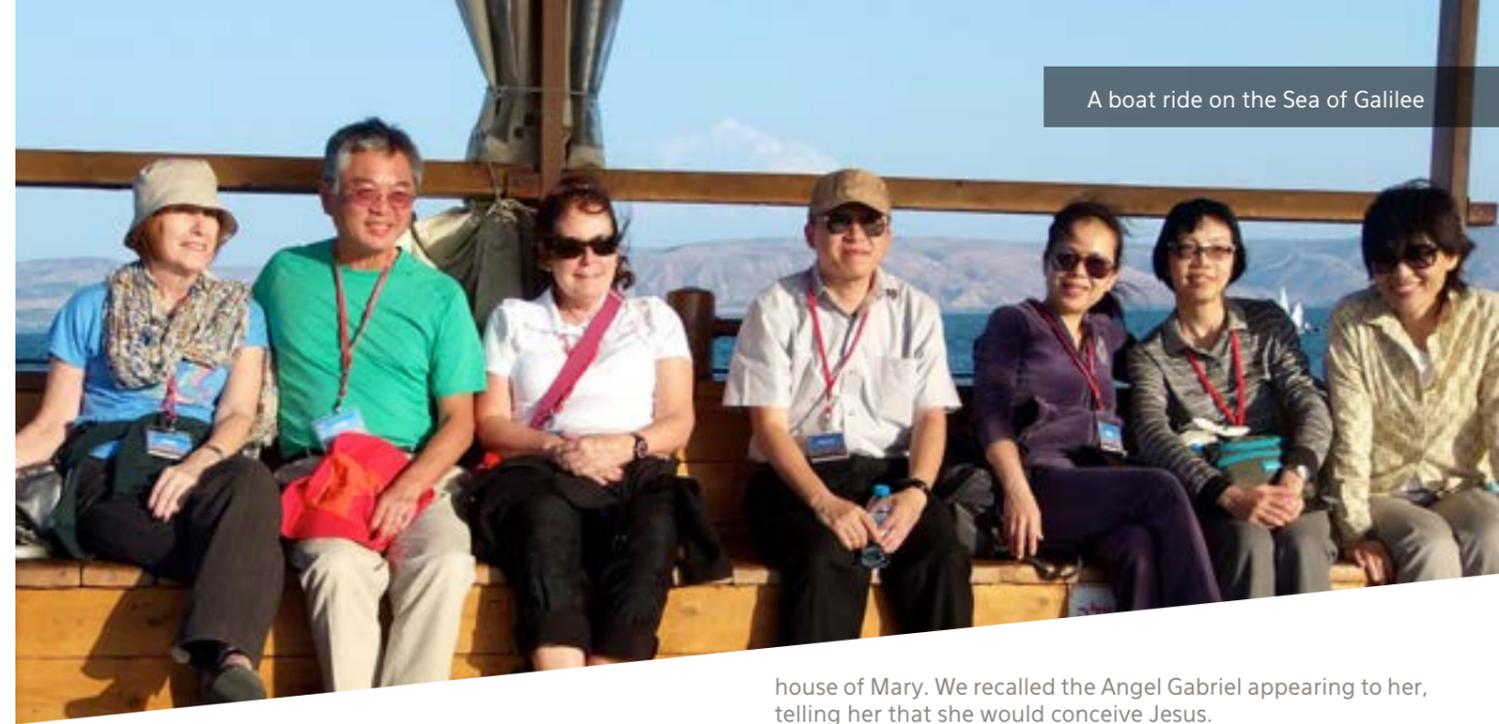
A team of five people looked after the whole group. Dean Matthias and the Revd Catherine Graham were essentially our shepherds, making sure we all had what we needed and that we did not get lost. They travelled with most of us from Hong Kong to Tel Aviv via Istanbul. Indeed, everything went like clockwork.

On arrival in Tel Aviv, Canon John Peterson and Canon Iyad Qumri, our local guide, greeted us. Iyad is the only legally registered Anglican Palestinian tour guide in the Holy Land. The Revd Mark Stanger, working for Iyad, joined us later.

John was our main guide for the whole trip. He was for 10-years Dean of St George's College in Jerusalem. He was also an archaeologist. It was John's background and experience that made this pilgrimage so attractive. Iyad was as lively a tour guide as one might find and at the end of the trip we enjoyed a wonderful meal with his family.



A boat ride on the Sea of Galilee



Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee

Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee: From the airport, with our driver for the trip, Omar, at the wheel, we drove north towards Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. We were first taken to the excavated site of Sepphoris, a centre of Roman administration and Jewish scholarship in the 1st Century. John explained that Sepphoris was only an hour's drive from Nazareth. That would have been within a day's journey on foot. The amphitheatre seated 4,000, telling us that there had been a population of 40,000 as amphitheatres were designed to seat 10% of the population of the town or city. It is highly likely that Joseph was involved in the construction of Sepphoris. He may have been a building contractor rather than a carpenter, the meaning having probably become twisted in translation. This would have meant that Joseph was in the higher echelons of the social and wealth structure, probably one tier below the politicians.

In Sepphoris we saw a house with a large room with square mosaic paving. John explained this was a triclinium where people would have had their meals lying on cushions laid along the sides. This was probably how the Last Supper was held and would be consistent with the reference made in John 13:23 "now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples ...", in stark contrast to Leonardo da Vinci's depiction of the Last Supper with Jesus and his disciples seated at a long table.

We stayed in Nazareth at the Sisters of Nazareth Convent, a guesthouse for pilgrims. But dinner did not come until we had celebrated the Eucharist at Christ Episcopal Church next door. We appreciated the warm hospitality of the Anglican priest there. Across the street from the Christ Episcopal Church is the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation built over the

house of Mary. We recalled the Angel Gabriel appearing to her, telling her that she would conceive Jesus.

Old Nazareth is very small. To put things in context, the width of Old Nazareth from east to west would be no more than from Queen's Road to Connaught Road, Central in Hong Kong and its length from north to south no more than from Hutchison House to Pedder Street.

The next morning we renewed our baptismal vows at the River Jordan under a bright clear blue sky. The Dean sprinkled us with water from the river using olive branches from near the riverbank. We took commemorative photographs or else meditated in silence.

We then travelled to the Mount of Beatitudes. To read again the Beatitudes where Jesus taught is some experience. Mount Eremos, a short distance away, encompassed the area where Jesus Christ spent much of his time teaching his disciples. From there, we wandered in meditative silence down the hill beside the Sea of Galilee. We arrived at a white stone wrought in the form of a cube under a tree. Catherine and Matthias prepared an altar and we celebrated the Eucharist. Everyone found this an extremely moving experience and many later recalled it as one of the spiritual highlights of the trip. The walk together in silence gave us a chance to be with God and to ask him to speak to us during our pilgrimage.

In Capernaum, where the Holy Family went after Joseph died, we saw the modern church built over Peter's house. The stunning circular design with glass windows all around gave a beautiful view of the Sea of Galilee from behind the altar. We then went to Tabgha, where the multiplication of loaves and fishes took place, before taking a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee.

A surprise awaited us on our last night in Nazareth. After dinner, we were taken in small groups to the excavated site in the basement of the guesthouse. There, we discovered a small house dating back to the first century. We went further down into the basement and found a rolling stone tomb. Archaeology tells us that rolling stone tombs were only in use for a hundred years of human history (50 BC to 50 AD). The surprise was that this was probably Joseph's house; he would have been able to afford, or else would have had the skills to construct, such a tomb. The site had always been referred to through the oral tradition as 'the house of the just'. With reference to Matthew 1:19: "then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily".

Bethlehem

Bethlehem: On our way southward towards Bethlehem, we spent the night at Taybeh, the only 100% Christian town in Palestine. In the village are the ruins of the 4th Century Church of St George where we saw evidence of a recent animal sacrifice and learned that some Christians still practice this on important occasions such as weddings.

Next on our way was the cave John found at Tekoa (the home of the Prophet Amos). John explained that inns were not like modern hotels with individual rooms but just a one-room building where everybody brought their own bedding and laid it on the floor. He argued that the scenario of the inhospitable innkeeper was unlikely; rather it may have been a very hospitable innkeeper who offered Mary the privacy of the cave below the inn to allow her the space to give birth to Jesus. We also saw an example of a manger; a hollowed rectangular piece of stone the perfect size to contain a newborn child.

This was an enlightening prelude to our visit to the Church of the Holy Nativity in Manger Square in Bethlehem, where we stood and sang in the cave below the church marking the place where Jesus was born.



Jerusalem

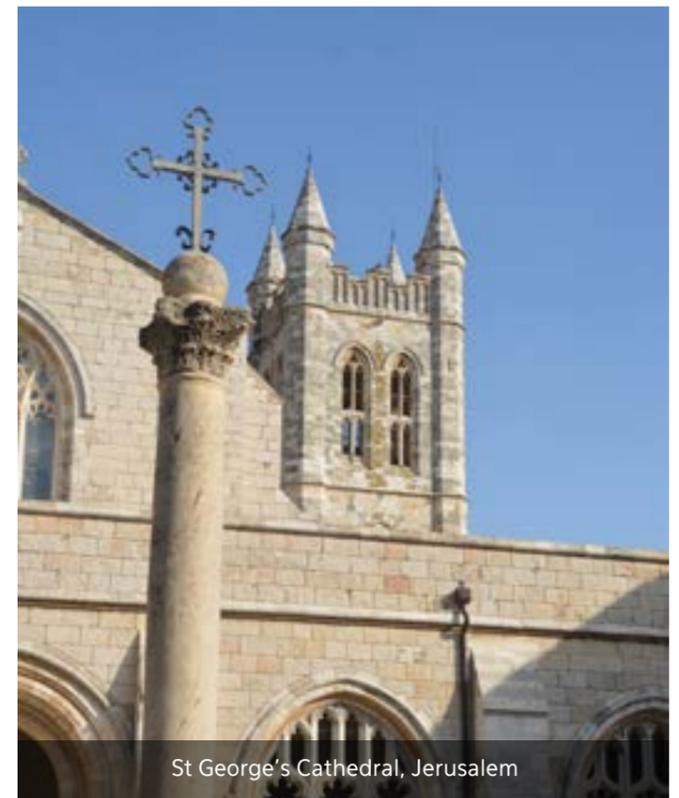
This fascinating city is perhaps the key place most people will think of when contemplating a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This city is so significant because the last week of Jesus' life unfolded there and his resurrection took place nearby. In preparation for our pilgrimage we read *The Last Week* by Marcus J. Borg, to understand the history, politics and philosophy surrounding Christ's crucifixion.

Here in Jerusalem, we visited the Western Wall, the retaining wall of the ancient Jewish temple and saw the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which at the time of our visit we were not allowed to enter. Jewish people do not visit the mount itself in case anyone should step upon the place where the Holy of Holies, containing the sacred Ark of the Covenant, used to be located. However, we witnessed the tensions, which spill over at the site when groups of settlers defy this and enter and process around, accompanied by police.

We undertook the Palm Sunday walk at Bethphage and went to the Garden of Gethsemane to reflect on Jesus' suffering shortly before his capture. Some of the olive trees there date back 1,700 years and may have been offshoots of those under which Jesus Christ prayed.

Later we celebrated the Eucharist in the Byzantine Church at Emmaus, where Jesus Christ first appeared after his crucifixion. Here, one of our pilgrims, Simmy Woo, sang a song that was a poignant experience for everyone.

At dawn next day we began to walk the 14 Stations of the Cross through the Old City. Taking turns, we carried our own cross, pausing at each Station for silent reflection and a short scripture reading and homily by John. This was a particularly spiritual experience, which I found one of the most profound of our pilgrimage, and there was hardly a dry eye amongst the pilgrims.



St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem

The last morning was spent at Wadi Qelt for silent reflections on our experiences. We sat on top of the hills overlooking the wilderness between Jericho and Jerusalem, an area Jesus must have travelled over many times.

Each pilgrim will recall different meaningful and touching moments. For me, Christmas and Holy Week will never be the same.



Following a silent walk from the Mount of Beatitudes, Dean Matthias celebrates a Eucharist overlooking the Sea of Galilee.



The Dome of the Rock



Church of All Nations (Roman Catholic) and the Church of St Mary Magdalene (Russian Orthodox) nestle peacefully together on the Mount of Olives

Nothing can quite prepare you for the chance to stand in front of the doorway of what was quite likely the Holy Family's residence in Nazareth, to imagine the infant Jesus running over the threshold, or to bend down and put one's whole hand on the place which commemorates the very spot where he was born. And to learn too that he was born not in a stable but in a cave.

Our wonderful guide, Canon John Peterson, took the time to show us a similar cave so that we could understand our surroundings when we visited the Church of the Holy Nativity. Otherwise, it is not always possible to appreciate, once in the Church, that you are in fact standing in a cave. I also appreciated John's argument that, contrary to the usual bad press in the standard school nativity show, the innkeeper was actually very hospitable, offering Mary the cave under the inn as a private place to give birth. These were wonderful things to take back to my 5-year old child, who was excited to hear that I had seen the place where Jesus was born and even sailed on the Sea of Galilee, just like the fishermen.

Kate Olley

Early November 2015. The deserts, wilderness and holy cities of Israel invoked in me the biblical stories and hymns that kept me company in my harsh, strenuous childhood: Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee. God, the creator of all things, so distant yet so near, acting through teachers, so redeemed a hard-headed, cold, outwardly removed, rebellious teenager.

After growing up, I was baptised, yet seldom attended church and often found excuses to justify this. As a pilgrim, and unaccustomed to revealing emotions then and there, I did not shed tears pressing myself against the Wailing Wall, did not speak to the Holy Spirit on the silent walk to the Sea of Galilee, and did not still myself to meditate upon the mountain when beholding the boundless sky and the vast endless valleys.

A quiet afternoon in late November, bowed before the image of Christ crucified in St John's Cathedral, all that should have been said but was left unsaid, the many things neglected, the chances missed, and the old hymn verse "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling", all pierced like a sword through the soul. At that moment, finally, uncontrollably ...

On the rainy night of 9 December, leaving behind everything familiar, bidding farewell to the beloved land where I belong, so as to honour a promise made twenty-four years ago, suddenly, an epiphany - why the children of Israel yearned unquenchably for the Promised Land.

Nothing happens but by God's will, so let my heart turn unto him.

Geraldine To
(Ed. Translated from Chinese)

The day before we were to walk the Stations of the Cross on Via Dolorosa, it was raining. John Peterson briefed us on the walk and challenged us, "Did Jesus have a choice?" He said we would go ahead irrespective of the rain. Next morning, some of us carried the cross in light rain, read out meditation material and prayed at each station. Back at the guesthouse, something came to my mind: Jesus did choose to love us despite all those sufferings leading to the Cross. Thank you, Lord, for your unfailing love.

When we were at the Dome of the Rock one Jewish settler came with a company of police. John explained that the settlers' purpose was to hasten the building of the third temple and the Messiah's second coming. The story of Hagar and Ishmael came to my mind. Men always want to help God a bit but "is there anything too hard for the Lord?"

The pilgrimage enriched me a lot, especially the Bible passages. Now, when I read the Bible, I can visualise the places like Nazareth, Galilee, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. The pilgrimage has brought so many of the scenes to life.

Evelyne Yeung

One of the most poignant experiences for me was during our visit to the Garden of Gethsemane, on the Mount of Olives. We had learnt that the olive trees growing in the garden for the past 1800 years had been grafted on to older roots, possibly dating back to the time of Jesus. We had prayed at the Rock of Agony in the Church of All Nations - the rock that sits in front of the altar surrounded by a wrought iron rail twisted to form thorns. During prayer, I was left with the sentence 'broken for him', something of both Jesus' sacrifice for us, and the change wrought in us as we try to serve our Lord. It was dusk when we exited the church. The Kidron valley was in front of us, the Jewish cemetery in the near ground and small patches of yellow light visible further through the mist. On the other side of the valley was the Temple Mount of Jerusalem's Old City, crowned by the Dome of the Rock. A sole minaret stood out as well, showing green lights, adding to an otherworldly setting. At that moment, the Muslim call to prayer came across the valley. Father Mark, one of our guides put it simply to us. It was embodying something common to everyone across the Holy Land prayer.

To me, the pilgrimage will stand out for years for giving me a new historical perspective on scripture as well as Jesus' life, a deeper understanding of the nature of his ministry and as a spiritual experience, and a glimpsing insight into the contemporary challenges in the region. It was made even more special by the opportunity to learn from and share fellowship throughout with my fellow pilgrims.

Edward Coles-Gale



Pilgrim Nicolas Yeung surveys vast the Judean Desert

PILGRIMS' REFLECTIONS

It has been a true pilgrimage and for me was the most memorable and beneficial trip of my spiritual life. No words can describe how blessed we were throughout the tour and I continued to feel the blessings right up to Christmas and New Year.

Family and friends questioned me on the timing of a visit to the Holy Land, given the circumstances. But like all others in the group I never doubted or worried about the trip. I knew that God would bless us, keep us and guide us on our journey, and he did. We felt peaceful, safe and loved in places we visited; always greeted with warm welcome, even on the street.

I waited for more than 10-years to visit the Holy Land but could never work out a time with my family, and I did not want to join a "holiday tour". I heard about the SJC pilgrimage one evening at a bible class, and was granted a place 3 weeks before the trip. God has a plan for all of us and sometimes we just have to be patient and trust in his plan.

The experience has been overwhelming. It's unforgettable; the history and cultures of the Orthodox Jews and the Palestinians and walking through sites that have made my reading come alive. Reading the bible since the trip has been more interesting as I can now picture the sites I have visited.

I shall always remember when we walked the Stations of the Cross - right through the Damascus gate. It was so moving and everyone in the group was thoroughly overcome and touched throughout the walk. There was not a dry eye amongst any of us.

I hope you enjoy reading our thoughts and perspectives on our trip. It has been overwhelming to know that we walked some of the same paths that Jesus walked. I hope you will be blessed the same way we were, on your pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Sharon Yih

This was my third pilgrimage to the Holy Land - a last minute rescue mission for me - and one that in many ways completed my spiritual journey.

I take away from this Pilgrimage two memories I shall have for the rest of my life. The first was our visit to the Wadi Qelt area or the Mount of Temptations for silent reflections. We were told to walk anywhere and meditate privately. Being a mountaineer in my younger days I immediately attacked the fairly steep ridges, to reach the highest point and capture the view of the area. I was well rewarded with the sight of a huge expanse of complete wilderness and emptiness. The land stretched out as far as the eye could see. It was breathtaking. I felt like the size of an ant standing there. My mind went back to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. I was close to the edge of a cliff and looked down at the valley below, being very careful to keep my balance. These words came into my head, "All these will I give to you, if you will fall down and worship me." "It is written, worship the Lord your God and serve only him." (Matthew 4:9b)

The second memory is of being challenged by Canon John Peterson's homily on the Emmaus Road story in Luke's gospel. "Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked to us on the way, while he opened to us the Scripture!" I have come away with the message that Christians are privileged to have the opportunity to break bread, but how do we in our daily lives invite others to share at our table? Every day I ask myself this question.

Faye Yee